

## In brief

### Skin cancer kills more Britons than Australians each year:

More Britons than Australians die of skin cancer each year, even though fewer people are diagnosed with the condition in the United Kingdom. The most recent figures available are for 1999; these show that the United Kingdom had 5990 cases of malignant melanoma and 1600 deaths and Australia had 7850 cases and 1000 deaths.

### Gates Foundation gives \$60m to microbicide research:

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is giving \$60m (£38m; €55m) to a non-profit organisation working to develop vaginal microbicides to protect women from HIV. The International Partnership for Microbicides, the recipient of the grant, estimates that a partially effective microbicide could prevent up to three million new HIV infections over three years.

### Screening for prostate cancer more popular than for colon cancer:

A study of 49 000 men aged 50 or more from across the United States showed that 75% had been screened for prostate cancer compared with 63% for colon cancer (*JAMA* 2003;289:1414). The authors say that doctors should inform patients of the known mortality benefit of colorectal cancer screening and the uncertainty about screening for prostate cancer.

### UK Biobank appoints chief executive:

The funders of the UK Biobank—the Medical Research Council, the Wellcome Trust, and the Department of Health—have announced the appointment of Dr John Newton of Oxford University's department of public health and primary care as the organisation's chief executive officer. UK Biobank is a venture involving up to 500 000 volunteers who will complete lifestyle questionnaires and provide a blood sample for DNA and other analysis.

### Belgium decriminalises cannabis:

Anyone smoking cannabis in private or with less than 5 g in their possession will no longer be prosecuted in Belgium under new legislation adopted on 27 March.

## World cancer rates set to double by 2020

Lynn Eaton *London*

Worldwide cancer rates are set to double by 2020, a report published this week by the World Health Organization says.

Currently 10 million new cancers are diagnosed each year worldwide, but unless there is an effective prevention campaign, the number will rise to 20 million in 17 years' time, says the report. If preventive measures were adopted, that figure could be reduced by a quarter, it states.

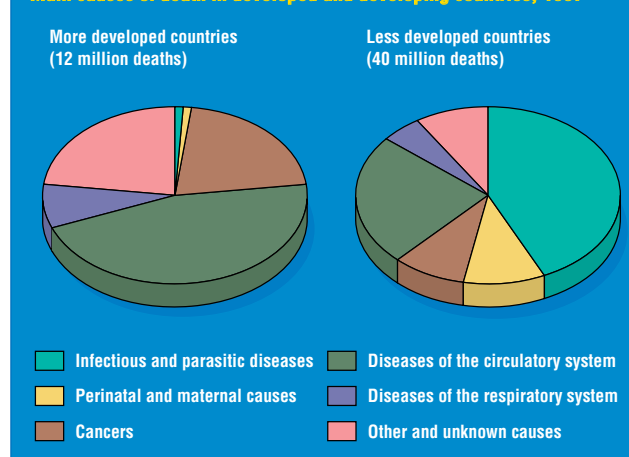
"Cancer is emerging as a major problem globally, both in more developed and in less developed countries," says the report. "Political will and international collaboration are now required for effective cancer control."

Current levels of smoking and unhealthy lifestyles are the main causes. The increasing proportion of elderly people will also contribute to the rise in the number of cancer cases worldwide.

The report looks at the causes of cancer, treatments, and prevention measures.

Cancer mortality in the world as a whole is more than twice that in developing countries, a factor the report attributes to the earlier onset of the tobacco epidemic, earlier exposure to occu-

Main causes of death in developed and developing countries, 1997



pational carcinogens, and the Western diet and lifestyle.

In developing countries, up to a quarter of cancers are caused by infections, including hepatitis B, which is linked to liver cancer, and the human papillomavirus, which is linked to cancer of the cervix. Between 1985 and 1997, the number of deaths in developing countries increased by at least 62% for circulatory diseases and cancers.

In her foreword to the report, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, the director general of WHO, says that tobacco consumption remains the most important avoidable cancer risk. "During the twentieth century approximately 100 million people died worldwide from tobacco-associated diseases. Half of all regular smokers are killed by the habit

and one quarter die prematurely before the age of 70," she wrote.

WHO is particularly concerned about the rising incidence of cancer in developing countries and the disproportionate suffering caused in disadvantaged populations.

It is soon to adopt the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which aims to reduce morbidity and mortality associated with tobacco consumption. It has also endorsed a global strategy giving the highest priority to cancer control measures.

The report calls for measures promoting a healthy diet, smoking cessation, and better access to immunisation. □

*World Cancer Report* is available from bookshops or direct from bookorders@who.ch

## Sharp decline in UK deaths from bowel cancer predicted

Kathryn Godfrey *London*

Screening for bowel cancer will lead to a sharp reduction in the number of deaths from the disease in the next decade, bowel cancer specialists said this week.

A national screening programme of 10 years' duration will prevent 5000 new cases and 3000 deaths each year in the United Kingdom, estimates Dr Wendy Atkin, head of the Population Screening Research Group and deputy director of Cancer Research UK's colorectal cancer unit at St Mark's Hospital, Harrow, London. Currently in the United Kingdom there are

about 35 000 diagnosed cases of bowel cancer and 16 000 deaths each year.

Dr Atkin said that if screening were introduced a sharp drop in incidence would be seen within the first five years. She said: "The results of screening will be that incidence will decrease and that the disease will be detected earlier and will then become more treatable."

A screening programme introduced in the United States in 1985 has produced a 30% reduction in incidence. Bowel cancer is the second most com-

mon cause of death from cancer in the United Kingdom. Eighty per cent of cases can be successfully treated if caught at an early stage.

In November 2002 the health secretary, Alan Milburn, announced a commitment to introduce a national bowel screening programme and asked the national cancer coordinator, Professor Mike Richards, to investigate workforce and training needs.

The government is currently weighing up the two screening options, faecal occult blood testing and flexible sigmoidoscopy. Results from the pilot studies of faecal occult blood testing will be released in the summer and from the sigmoidoscopy pilot towards the end of next year. □